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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SENV](#) [GB](#) [FR](#)
SUBJECT: GABON: PRESIDENT ALI BONGO'S VISIT TO FRANCE
(NOVEMBER 18-20)

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Classified By: Andrew Young, Political Counselor, 1.4 (b/d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: President Ali Bongo of Gabon enjoyed a successful visit to France November 18-20, according to MFA DAS-equivalent Stephane Gruenberg. The visit marked for both sides Bongo's assumption of the presidency and his initial steps to develop his own identity as national leader apart from that of his father. Bongo met with a bevy of French leaders, the high point being his lunch with President Sarkozy on November 20. Bongo also reportedly discussed more sensitive subjects such as the Gabon-France defense agreement, good governance, the BEAC financial scandal (he has proposed a new leader for BEAC) and Sarkozy's idea to have a meeting in Paris among Gulf of Guinea/Congo Basin states (tentatively scheduled for December 16) prior to the Copenhagen conference on environmental matters. Gruenberg said that while there would always likely be an element of anti-French sentiment within the Gabonese public, he said that such sentiment had cooled considerably since the anti-French violence that took place during the August 30 presidential election. In sum, Bongo made a positive impression on the French, with both sides indicating a willingness to maintain the so-called "privileged partnership" which has formed the basis of bilateral relations since independence. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) MFA DAS-equivalent Stephane Gruenberg on November 27 briefed on Gabonese President Ali Bongo's visit to Paris the previous week. The visit had been relatively hastily planned, he asserted, with Bongo visiting Paris after stops at the FAO in Rome and in London. The highlight of the visit was Bongo's November 20 lunch with President Sarkozy. He also had separate meetings with PM Francois Fillon, Finance Minister Christine Lagarde, Interior Minister Brice Hortefeux, Environment and Sustainable Development Minister Jean-Louis Borloo, State Secretary for Cooperation and Francophonie Alain Joyandet, and the CEO of oil company Total, among others. (NOTE: Bongo thus saw virtually everybody worth seeing at the high end of the GOF, with the exception of Defense Minister Herve Morin. END NOTE.)

"Privileged Partnership"

[1](#)3. (C) Gruenberg acknowledged that Bongo's visit amounted to a "coming out party" of sorts, with the overall aim of the visit to clarify the direction Gabon would take under Ali Bongo's leadership. Gruenberg said that both sides understood that, because of Omar Bongo's long tenure in office and the elder statesman's status and influence that

went with it, Gabon had "punched above its weight" for much of Omar Bongo's presidency. The French and Gabonese understood that Ali Bongo could not expect at the outset to match his father's influence. Gruenberg said that the French assured Bongo that France would continue to be a supportive partner and that Gabon would continue to enjoy a "privileged partnership" status with France. When French leaders, including especially Sarkozy, made this clear to Bongo, he had in effect gotten from France what he had come here to obtain, Gruenberg suggested.

Key Issues

14. (C) DEFENSE AGREEMENT: Besides being personally accepted by France's leadership, Bongo also discussed a number of important substantive issues with the French, Gruenberg stressed. First among these was the Gabon-France defense agreement. (NOTE: Sarkozy's intention to revise France's Africa policy involves renegotiating defense agreements with eight African countries, including Gabon. The agreements, products of the immediate post-independence period, are deemed to be obsolete, as some of them contain provisions that would allow, for example, one of the partner countries to ask France to send security forces to maintain internal security, something the France would not want to do today. END NOTE.) Gruenberg said that the renegotiation with Gabon was going smoothly, with a new accord likely to be signed early in 2010. Without going into detail, Gruenberg said that the agreement would focus on training and professionalization programs the French would provide to Gabon's military. Gruenberg did not mention the long-term status of France's present military base in Gabon.

15. (C) GOOD GOVERNANCE: Bongo also discussed with the French a range of good governance issues (a point the French were keen to discuss with him). He made a commitment to

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improve governance and curtail corruption in Gabon. Gruenberg found this commitment interesting because in raising governance issues and acknowledging a range of governance problems, Bongo was implicitly criticizing his father and the way he ran things. As part of his reform plans, Bongo said that Gabon would adopt policies for a more rational exploitation of its natural resources and for improving Gabon's infrastructure. Bongo asked France for its support in helping him reform Gabon in these sectors; Gruenberg said that France would support him, indicating that French support could well consist of technical assistance.

16. (C) BEAC: Bongo discussed with the French the BEAC (Central Bank of Central African States) banking scandal, involving large-scale corruption and embezzlement by a number of figures (reftels). Bongo stressed to the French that he had taken decisive action by recalling the former BEAC head in October and proposing new leadership when the dimensions of the case became apparent. The French appreciated his response but Gruenberg commented that Bongo had little choice but to act as he did, given the circumstances. Gruenberg said the case arose from a series of bad investments and then the conversion of a significant amount of money, including by, apparently, BEAC's Paris office. The French were conducting a law enforcement investigation and Gruenberg predicted that indictments (including probably against French citizens) would eventually result. He noted that one sensitive aspect of the case centered on the fact that the head of the BEAC has traditionally been Gabonese, something that Gabon's neighbors (particularly Equatorial Guinea) increasingly resent. Gruenberg had the impression that the fact that the bank has traditionally had a Gabonese in charge put Bongo in a position where he had to respond, and he did so.

17. (C) PRE-COPENHAGEN MEETING: Sarkozy raised with Bongo his idea of holding a meeting prior to the upcoming Copenhagen conference on environmental issues that would

include the Gulf of Guinea/Congo Basin states and possibly Brazil. Sarkozy hoped to develop a shared view of environmental issues, especially forestry issues, with the states of the region, prior to the Copenhagen meeting. The Paris meeting was tentatively scheduled for December 16 and the invitations were in the process of being sent. Gruenberg said that the invitations would be extended to member states drawn from COMIFAC (Commission for the Forests of Central Africa), the regional organization devoted to forestry issues (<http://www.comifac.org>). Gruenberg was not sure whether all of COMIFAC's member states would be invited or whether all would be interested -- he noted that Chad, for example, might not view forestry issues important enough to attend. Bongo, in any case, expressed his support to Sarkozy for the meeting.

Anti-French Sentiment in Gabon

18. (C) Gruenberg downplayed the notion that anti-French sentiment in Gabon would have a major effect on relations. He noted that the anti-French demonstrations and vandalism at the time of Bongo's election did not involve a large number of Gabonese. A good number of the demonstrators were professional hooligans ("casseurs") always looking for excuses to loot and provoke violence. That said, Gruenberg acknowledged that some Gabonese believed that French influence in Gabon was excessive and that Ali Bongo was "France's man." However, he noted that if the opposition had been united, Bongo might well have lost the election. Gruenberg added that a recent cause of Gabonese ire against France centered on visas and the difficulties young Gabonese, especially, had in obtaining them. This contributed to the lingering ill-will directed at France, in Gruenberg's view.

"He's Ready"

19. (C) Summing up, Gruenberg said that Ali Bongo made a favorable impression. He knew his subjects, signaled a willingness to break, at least partially, with the past, and was beginning to demonstrate leadership qualities. He observed that one could always hope for a "more nearly perfect" leader, and that it was too early to say how Bongo would evolve, but for now, Gruenberg concluded, "he's ready to be President of Gabon."

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